

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 42

THE WASHINGTON POST
13 November 1979

Loneliness of a Long Distance Runner

Victories in Maine, Iowa Propel George Bush in Uphill Race for GOP Nomination

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MILWAUKEE—At 7:23 a.m. a bone-chilling 34-degree wind sweeps off Lake Michigan as the long distance runner slips out of a black Lincoln Continental limousine and heads north along the shore.

It is rush hour, and the traffic is heading south to punch time cards at offices and factories downtown. Nobody notices the runner, the man running against the flow, the man running for president of the United States.

Even if they did notice, they probably wouldn't recognize his face. For the polls, those strange yardsticks politicians live and die by, say only a handful of diehard Republicans in the country know who George Hebert Walker Bush is.

But Bush doesn't mind, not this week of all weeks. He is on an emotional high. He has been ever since he upset a host of GOP rivals in a straw poll in Portland, Maine, 10 days ago, a poll Sen. Howard H. Baker Jr. (Tenn.) was so confident he'd win that he brought a planeload of reporters with him to witness the event.

The victory was fleeting, meaningless except in the blue smoke and mirror world of politics. No delegates were elected. No binding commitments made. But it was just the kind of thing Bush needed to send adrenaline coursing.

"It made a tremendous difference. Phone calls coming into our office have jumped 200 percent. People identify with Maine here," former governor Hugh Gregg, Bush's New Hampshire campaign chairman, told him. "Suddenly, George Bush isn't just a serious candidate, he's a red-hot one." Malcolm Baldrige, his Connecticut chairman, boasted at a Republican dinner in Hartford.

So Bush keeps running, from city to city, from state to state, carrying an old white sweatshirt and navy blue sweat pants in his battered grey suitcase. At age 55, he still has the look of an athlete, lean and wiry.

His route is the same one another jogger, James Earl Carter, took to the White House. And Bush has to take it if he wants to stand a prayer of becoming president.

"Yet, it's like a long-distance race," he says, relishing the metaphor. "I feel I'm setting a proper pace and I can sustain it."

Among the nine contenders for the GOP nomination, only Bush and Rep. Phil Crane (Ill.) have traveled so far and so long—14 months. Since Labor Day alone, Bush has visited 91 cities, delivered more than 15 speeches and slept in 41 different hotel rooms. He has spent only 60 hours in his Houston home, he says.

"I'm not like Walter Mondale [when he was running for president in 1975]," Bush says. "I don't feel like I'm going to die every time I see another Holiday Inn. I'm just damn glad to get to one so I can get some rest."

But his is a long, frustrating journey. While Carter and Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) crisscross the nation aboard 727 airliners with scores of reporters and aides, Bush flies on commercial flights, often accompanied only by one aide, David Bates, a Houston lawyer 27 years his junior. Sometimes a reporter or two follow, but often not.

Personal moments and pleasures are few. Maybe a glass of chablis at lunch while flying from Milwaukee to Boston, or a late-night vodka martini, or a three-mile run along Lake Michigan. In between the endless meetings, rallies and telephone calls, the candidate wonders about his opponents, their tactics and what juices sustain them. He wonders what GOP front-runner Ronald Reagan thinks about him. He wonders what keeps Rep. John Anderson (Ill.) and Sen. Bob Dole (Kan.), both of whom are even farther behind Reagan, going.

He silently agonizes over his image in the press. Every once in a while it gushes forth, almost uncontrolled. "Why am I always described as tweedy, Ivy League and elitist and Teddy Kennedy [a man of similar

background] is described as a compassionate man of the people?" Bush asked in a dinner conversation here last week. "Teddy hits a tennis ball and he's an athlete. I do it and I'm an elitist. He has a sailboat and it's neat. I have one and I'm an elitist."

"There is a different standard for Democrats than Republicans," he said. "My life has been one of genuine accomplishment. All that I ask to be looked at is the record."

What keeps George Bush running?

Part is the competitor in him and "the smell of the greasepaint and the roar of the crowd," he acknowledges. Part is an inner conviction, one that comes to most politicians every time they look in the mirror, that he would be a good president, and that he really can be elected.

"I don't get discouraged when people say, 'Who is George Bush?'" the candidate said late one night last week. "You see, I don't think I'm nearly as much a long shot as every one else does. Otherwise I wouldn't be able to drag my carcass around the country. I see things others don't. I see the progress we've made."

Bush, perhaps more than any other Republican hopeful, has made progress. But it has come in inches, not miles: a straw ballot victory in Maine, five straw-vote ballot wins in Iowa and a now demonstrated ability to put together an impressive group of supporters in a series of early primary states. (His Wisconsin campaign chairman, John MacIver, for instance, managed Richard Nixon's 1968 and 1972 efforts in the state. Gregg, his New Hampshire chairman, held that same job for Ronald Reagan in 1976.)

Individually, these moves aren't much. Collectively, they indicate Bush has put together a campaign organization topped only by Reagan's in New Hampshire, Iowa, Connecticut, Wisconsin and perhaps other states.

Organization is one of Bush's two great strengths; the other is his resume. It is long and very WASPish: son of a U.S. senator; graduate of Phillips Andover Academy and Yale (Phi Beta Kappa); Navy pilot at age 18; World War II hero; successful businessman and self-made millionaire (oil); two-term congressman; ambassador to the United Nations; envoy to China; CIA director; and chairman of the Republican National Committee.

The trouble is that hardly any voters Bush runs into remember what he did in any of the jobs. Even fewer believe that he can be elected. So Bush spends half of each stump speech telling who he is and how he can win.

"There's no magic in this. But remember Jimmy Carter went into the Iowa precinct caucuses with only 5 percent support in the polls and he came out with 20 percent," he tells every crowd. "History is filled with front runners who didn't finish in front."

Bush and Senate Minority Leader Baker are allegedly the two leading "moderates" in the crowded GOP field. But if Bush is a moderate in anything more than dress, it is hard to see on the stump. His standard speech could be given by almost any other GOP contender without anyone noticing.

He is for a stronger CIA and FBI, a bigger defense budget, a tax cut, protecting the shah of Iran and a get-tough foreign policy. He is against excess government regulation, SALT II and Jimmy Carter's human rights policy. "I see the world not as I wish it were, but as it is," Bush says, turning an old Bobby Kennedy line upside down.

Months ago, Bush's friends, like Mac Baldrige, his Connecticut chairman, told the candidate that if he expected them to work their tails off for him he would have to get more forceful, not another John Connally, but less like a professor lecturing the Council on Foreign Relations.

So Bush got more forceful. He hired a voice teacher and threw away his half-glasses. He became more confident and more strident. You can see the difference in his exaggerated hand movements, the clenched fist and the forefinger stabbing at the air. You can see it in the tension in his body. At times, he looks like a spring about to uncoil.

He looks unnatural and strained.

Bush is clearly a man searching for a political identity. While he was waiting for a television interview to start in Hartford the other day, Bush brushed back his hair, asking, "How do I look?"

"It depends on how you'd like to look," his interviewer replied.

"I'd like to look presidential with a lot of leadership thrown in," Bush said.